

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN QUEENSLAND

Dialogic inquiry: From theory to practice

A Dissertation submitted by

Jennie Swann, BA, MEd, Cert Online Ed

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ABSTRACT

This study used theories of social learning, dialogue and inquiry to develop an interactive website to support dialogic inquiry online. The literature on online learning often takes a technological rather than a pedagogic perspective which appears to assume that today's university students know how to learn through inquiry using social media online. Yet there is a great deal of evidence that this is not the case. An examination of the literature of adult learning and primary school pedagogy in terms of their relevance for social learning online, together with an exploration of notions of dialogue and community, led to the identification of an existing dialogic community of inquiry model from which an "artefact" was developed. Both the model and the artefact were explored and redeveloped through three iterations of testing, using a design research methodology. Design research is sometimes considered too long-term an approach to be attempted in a PhD. However it has been possible to engage in the development stages of the process, to a point where the artefact is ready for wider testing. Thus, graduate level online discussion forums were examined using discourse analysis and social network analysis techniques as well as participant reflections which at each iteration were subjected to structured processes of evaluation and reflection in order to refine the model and develop the artefact for the next iteration of testing. As the community of inquiry model was redeveloped to take account of the shift from supported to independent inquiry through dialogue it was found that the community dialogue dimension was fundamental to the effectiveness of critical and creative dialogue. The artefact, a website containing 20 sets of open questions to facilitate community, creative and critical dialogue for inquiry in a university environment, is now ready for field trials.

CERTIFICATION OF DISSERTATION

I certify that the ideas, experimental work, results, analyses, software and conclusions reported in this dissertation are entirely my own effort, except where otherwise acknowledged. I also certify that the work is original and has not been previously submitted for any other award.

Signature of candidate

Date

ENDORSEMENT

Signature of Primary Supervisor

Date

Signature of Associate Supervisor

Date

In memory of
Matthew Lipman
1922—2010

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NOTATION

Māori words:	Pākeha = White or European people; whanau = family
Electronic books:	Where reference has been made to ebooks which are not paginated, a location number has been provided in the citation itself, and the total number of locations in the full reference. Together these should provide sufficient information for a quotation to be found in a paper edition of the same book.
Online sources:	Where reference has been made to online sources not available in print form, such as blogs and wikis, a paragraph number has been provided rather than a page number.
Personal pronouns:	Use of personal pronouns: since both I and all of the tutors who participated in this research are female, I have used the pronoun “she” in many cases rather than attempting to use the more unwieldy gender-nonspecific terms. “She” should of course be taken to include “he,” and so on.
Identification of discussion forum posts	A full record of all the posts in all the discussion forums studied is provided in Appendix A. Each post is numbered and quotes from these posts are identified by number of iteration, number or letter identifier of forum, and post number. Thus in Iteration 1, where three threads of Discussion Forum 10 were analysed, the identifier 1.1.1 refers to the first iteration, first thread, first post; where students were assigned to groups, the identifier 2.A1.1 refers to the second iteration, Group A1, first post; and the identifier 3.A.1 refers to the third iteration, Group A, first post.
Quotations from discussion forums	In order to retain their authenticity, all quotes from discussion forum posts are reproduced verbatim, without correction or indication of error. They are likely to be more comprehensible to a reader without the repeated introduction of the term (sic).
Terms used:	<p>Pedagogy: Although the participants in this research study were university tutors and students, a great deal of relevant educational theory has been developed through work with children. Therefore the word “pedagogy” has been used in preference to the less-common term “andragogy.”</p> <p>The West: This is perhaps the best-known means of referring to the developed world, and in this thesis to the Eurocentric views of thought and knowledge associated with that culture. This term has been used in this dissertation because of its common use, and its brevity outweighs its lack of accuracy. For us in the Antipodes, of course, these “Western” countries are in the North.</p> <p>Tutor: Throughout the dissertation all participating lecturers have been referred to as tutors. This was a reflection of their role in the research study rather than a measure of their employment status.</p>
Abbreviations:	The following abbreviations have been used. All have been explained when they were first used.
ARGUNAUT	A European Union funded project which used artificial intelligence applications to support the moderation of synchronous dialogue online. Its home page is at http://www.argunaut.org/

AUT University	Auckland University of Technology (brand name)
CCS	Classroom Community Scale (Rovai, 2002a) a questionnaire used by permission of its creator.
CoI	Community of inquiry
DA	Discourse Analysis
DR	Design research
DF	Discussion forum
IBL	Inquiry based learning
LMS	Learning Management System (Blackboard at AUT)
MOOC	Massive open online course
NZQA	New Zealand Qualifications Authority
SNA	Social network analysis
SNAPP	Social Networks Adapting Pedagogical Practice software tool that allows visualisation of the network of interactions in discussion forums. First developed by a consortium of Australian and Canadian universities (http://research.uow.edu.au/learningnetworks/seeing/snapp/index.html), an updated version is now available from http://www.snappvis.org/?page_id=4

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FOREWORD

The first undergraduate lecture I ever attended was in economics, and the lecturer began by saying something like this:

Some of you will be successful in business regardless of what I can teach you. Some of you will never be successful in business, regardless of what I teach you. I'm here for the rest of you, the majority, because I can help you to be better in business than you would be otherwise.

Although it is situated in a different arena, the purpose of my PhD research study is very similar. Some people are naturally good at facilitating dialogue online. Their subtle interjections shift the argument slightly, open up new perspectives and encourage those on the fringes to enter the dialogic space. In my experience, the majority of tutors do not have this natural facility. It is something that they want to be good at, and are prepared to work at, and it is my job, as an academic adviser in a university centre for learning and teaching, to help them. But how? This is the question which I have sought to answer in this research study.

I have always been interested in language and communication. My first degree subject choice, economics, was the result of parental pressure: “You’ll only become an English teacher.” After a post-graduate teaching qualification and a couple of years teaching economics and statistics, I did become an English teacher and I found it fascinating. I spent 20 years teaching academic English in universities and polytechnics in Singapore, Hong Kong and Malawi and an MEd in applied linguistics and teaching English as a foreign language further increased my desire to learn more about how people of diverse cultures and backgrounds could come to understand each other through talking together and listening to each other with respect.

Working as a volunteer at Malaŵi College of Distance Education while my children were babies showed me the determination that some people can have to get an education even when it is very difficult for them. At that time Malaŵi had sufficient places for only 15% of those who were eligible to attend secondary school. For the other 85%, distance learning was the only option. Young people would queue for days in the hot sun to register to study African history and geography, agriculture, home economics, and also English literature, sciences and maths. Most of them became better-educated farmers, workers and parents and a few became the pride of their villages by entering, and graduating from, the University of Malaŵi. Graduation ceremonies were noisy, colourful and emotional as a single beat of the great drum gifted to the University by Mzee Jomo Kenyatta marked the achievement of each new graduate.

Education can be a strong force for development but it can also perpetuate the agendas of the dominant countries of the world. When I began my own distance learning, tutored by two of the fathers of distance education, John B  ath and B  rje Holmberg, my interest was in exploring ways of making it more open and more reflective of the needs and aspirations of its learners, the citizens of tomorrow. On the one hand the students I taught brought their own cultures and ways of thinking with them to university, and on the other, they were there in order to obtain an education which would equip them to understand and work with people of the developed world. As a teacher of academic literacies I found myself again and again exploring these different perspectives on thinking and reasoning.

Over the past few decades, Western culture has shifted the goal of public discourse from understanding what is going on in the world to winning an argument, in a way which has been detrimental to education. There seems to be a gulf between the ideal argumentation schema of Toulmin and Van Eemeren, and argument in practice, in the newspapers, on television, and online. Making an argument is not the same as having an

argument, yet public discourse in Western culture has taken on a combative metaphor—the war on drugs, the battle of the sexes—causing ritualised conflict, rather than genuine examination of opposing ideas (Tannen, 1998). An example of this in action occurred in an edition of New Zealand TV1's *Close Up* on 6th October, 2011, when Perth-based professor of obstetric medicine Dr Barry Walters was questioned about his alleged assertion that women who opt to have children later in life were being selfish. Both in his original comments and during the interview Dr Walters made it clear that he was referring only to women over the age of 40 with existing age-related medical conditions which could cause a pregnancy to be fatal for both mother and child. Nevertheless, neither the presenters of the program nor the viewers whose opinions were reported at the end of the item appeared to deviate from their original assumption that he was referring to all women over the age of 35. This was not an argument. It was not even a dialogue, and still less an inquiry. It was a series of monologues in a competition which had to have a winner.

Against such a backdrop, it is perhaps hardly surprising that I have often found that my students resist engagement in dialogue online. Many students, of many different ethnicities, have told me they find the online environment a harsh one for exploring their emerging understandings. At first these ideas are tender and vulnerable to attack. A kinder environment is needed, a dialogic space in which people feel encouraged to express their understandings as they grow, to change their minds as they need to. So the motivation behind this research study was to find ways of creating a dialogic space online which would enable people to explore their own and each others' worlds to create a *bricolage*, or tapestry, of understanding.